

***STATUS REPORT ON THE USE OF NEW LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
AND INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE LEARNING APPROACHES
IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION -
based on the national reports and steering committee reports submitted
within the TNP2 subproject on NLEs***

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1. INTRODUCTION

Subproject 2 of the second Thematic Network Project in the area of languages concentrates on exploring the role of New (language) Learning Environments (NLEs) in Higher Education (HE) language teaching in Europe and on drawing recommendations as to how these new opportunities could be successfully integrated into language teaching practices. The report below is based on the synthesis report written in January 2002 on the basis of some 20 national reports provided by the scientific committee members at the end of year one of the project, ie. in 2001, and later synthesized by the steering committee of the project. In the present brief summary report the focus is on how we have defined the concepts of NLE and ILL (Independent Language Learning), what role they play in present HE language teaching practices, what main concerns were perceived by the project participants and what recommendations could be drawn for the future. These recommendations are to be discussed and developed further during this workshop.

2. DEFINING NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENT and INDEPENDENT LANGUAGE LEARNING and the POTENTIAL THEY OFFER

The concept of **New Learning Environment** was defined by the scientific committee as follows: the term refers to two kinds of new learning contexts, each of which is extremely varied in its potential and in the learning and teaching approaches that it makes possible. These are

- 1) Learning contexts created by **NEW TECHNOLOGIES**, enabling e(lectronic)-learning and teaching, and later also m(obile)-learning and teaching; ie. **ICT- ENHANCED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING**;
- 2) Learning contexts created by **NEW HUMAN RESOURCES** which become available through mobility, ie. *systematic use of the presence and experience of multilingual and multicultural staff and students for language and culture learning purposes.*

It should be noted here already that only a few, relatively unsystematic, attempts to indicate the use of the latter environment for language learning were documented in the national reports. Thus, the main part of what follows as survey findings refers to the ICT-enhanced learning and teaching environment, although the new mobility-created environment is also acknowledged.

Independent Language Learning was defined in the national reports either directly or indirectly, and the term was seen to refer either to the **skills** involved in self-directed learning or to the actual **format or method** of learning outside the classroom. The descriptions used most often were:

- a) *management of one's own learning* (also called autonomous / self-directed learning);
- b) *learning independently outside regular classroom with or without teacher guidance* (eg. in a self-access centre, abroad);
- c) *learning alone, with a partner, or with a support group*;
- d) *using structured or unstructured* (ie. authentic, natural) *materials*;
- e) *using NLEs for continuous, life-long language learning.*

All in all, **NLEs and ILL approaches were seen to have great potential** in that they could play a key role

at least in promoting multilingualism, cultural diversity and European co-operation, in enhancing student and staff mobility, in developing materials and delivering courses in less widely used and taught languages and in proficiency assessment, as well as life-long learning in general. This is because they can

- ✂ provide “natural”, authentic language and culture input,
- ✂ provide a cost-effective way to offer on-line training in eg. LWULT languages,
- ✂ assist in becoming acquainted with host cultures,
- ✂ develop intercultural communication skills,
- ✂ provide experience in self-directed, independent learning,
- ✂ promote and develop critical thinking and other life-long learning skills,
- ✂ foster collaboration and sharing between individuals and institutions,
- ✂ provide reliable, comparable measures for assessment,
- ✂ can be used for effective and tailored dissemination and promotion,
- ✂ provide a channel for carrying out surveys and studies, and
- ✂ provide a powerful channel for disseminating research information and educational programmes.

3. OVERVIEW OF EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURES AND POLICIES IN LANGUAGE-RELATED HIGHER EDUCATION

On the basis of the national reports the following trends seem to describe the present situation of the use of NLEs in European Higher Education.

- ❖ There is great variation between countries, between institutions, and even between departments.
- ❖ There is an increasing awareness of the potential, but lack of practical know-how.
- ❖ National policies regarding the use and integration of NLEs, ICT, and ILL are far more common than institutional policies.
- ❖ Language-related institutional policies and technological adaptations are still rare.
- ❖ Current trend seems to be to transform traditional language laboratories into multimedia learning, self-access, and resource centres.
- ❖ Funding tends to be more available for equipment than for user support (even in institutions with good infrastructures).
- ❖ Facilities typically provide the following:: Internet access, on-line courses and reference materials, digitised materials, video-conferencing and interactive communication opportunities, CD-Rom materials, TV+VHS+DVD.
- ❖ Many virtual campus / university / network university projects are being developed.

The main concerns expressed in the national reports included the following points:

- ❖ Facilities were not seen suitable for language learning – many were seen as outdated and inflexible.
- ❖ Although the facilities are good they lack technical support.
- ❖ Pedagogical guidance is also lacking, particularly as regards language learning and teaching.
- ❖ Advances in NLEs tend to be too simplistic, and there is an emphasis on economic issues.
- ❖ Too much of the use is based on traditional models of knowledge transmission.
- ❖ Collaboration and joint strategies are missing.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT SITUATION IN INTEGRATING NLEs AND INDEPENDENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The present situation in integrating NLEs and independent learning activities into higher education language provision was considered from the viewpoints of students majoring in languages (e.g. future language professionals – teachers, translators, interpreters, etc.), students of non-language disciplines, learner and staff training and changing profiles, and from the viewpoint of promoting multilingualism, mobility, cultural awareness, and co-operation. The general prerequisites for a successful use of NLEs and ILL approaches in language learning and teaching suggested in the national reports are also listed below. In practice, there are two main “models” according to which NLEs are implemented in language education:

1. The **ADD-ON model**, which tends to consider **the new environment as additional to the existing structure and practice**, i.e. no changes in the existing system are necessary; and
2. The **ADD-IN model**, where **NLEs are integrated into the existing system** thus causing changes in its structure and content and in professional development.

The first model is characterised by a more unsystematic use of NLEs in the sense that the use is typically based on individual initiative. Often the existing practice is transferred to the NLE as it is, primarily for economic reasons. The second model is often a collaborative effort based on institutional strategies and the outcome is often some pedagogical innovation. There is a tendency for institutions to pass through the first model in their pursuit of the second, unless proper pedagogical preparation and training is available. The environments, however, are only as good as their underpinning learning ethos. Thus, many universities which emulate networked learning and the development of virtual campuses often end up trying to reproduce real university learning environments based on very traditional models of knowledge transmission. The same applies to language education. The changes in the attitudes, initiative, and approaches required from both learners and teachers in order to manage knowledge and skill construction together in a reciprocal partnership while using new technologies in a flexible way are substantial in nature and can only be implemented over a considerable time period

In connection with the use of NLEs the following **trends and concerns** were expressed:

- ❖ There is a general increase in use, but the full potential is not used.
- ❖ The mobility-created NLE is not used systematically, although there are good examples of tandem and buddy learning approaches.
- ❖ Mastery of technical aspects overshadows pedagogical issues, although new approaches do exist.
- ❖ The most common use of NLEs appears to be in the teaching of students of non-language disciplines and in the in-service training of professionals.
- ❖ Learner training for ILL and NLE use is in most cases unsystematic.
- ❖ New roles of “instructors“ have not been sufficiently explored (eg. advising, facilitating, tutoring vs. teaching), although they affect both staff structures and pedagogical approaches.
- ❖ Funding and other support stops at the technical level (and is unequal).
- ❖ Efficient collaboration and joint development is lacking.

The national reports also identified **prerequisites for a successful use of NLE and ILL approaches**. In connection with this issue there is need to develop

- ❖ *institutional policies* to provide a framework for practice and development,
- ❖ *appropriate technological infrastructures & continuous, tailored support,*
- ❖ *student training and support* and strategies for ILL and the use of NLEs for lifelong language learning,
- ❖ *new strategic management skills* in order to facilitate mentality and attitude change,
- ❖ *critical thinking and evaluation skills to make informed decisions about learning and teaching, and,*
- ❖ *co-operation and collaboration, as well as more systematic sharing of information and experience.*

On the basis of their work within the national frameworks, the scientific committee then drew preliminary recommendations for the future. These recommendations are to be refined and prioritized in its future work.

5. TENTATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURES (Version 1)

(Implementation levels: E-European level; N-national; I-institutional)

1. *Development of national and institutional educational visions, policies, and strategies to recognise and foster the value of multilingualism and cultural competence, as well as ICT and lifelong learning skills, as integral parts of academic professionalism and competence. (N/I)*
2. *Improvement, updating, and tailoring of the necessary infrastructure (technical, strategic, staff) to guarantee baseline conditions and to serve the purposes of using NLEs in a flexible way in teaching and for independent language learning (ILL). (I/N)*
3. *Tailored and continuous technical support for actors involved and interdisciplinary co-operation. (I/N)*
4. *Continuous practical and methodological teacher development programmes and pedagogical support tailored particularly for the needs of higher education language teachers. (N/I)*
5. *Reassessment and updating of pre-service education of all language professionals to ensure their future expertise in the field. (N/I)*
6. *Reassessment of qualifications and job descriptions and establishment of new qualifications programmes (e.g. linguistic engineer). (N/I)*
7. *Systematic learner training for independent language learning (ILL) and use of NLEs and adequate support systems. (I)*
8. *Acknowledgement of language studies as an integral part of academic and professional qualifications in all fields, and accreditation and validation such studies as well as independent language learning achievement. (N/I)*
9. *Establishment of common standardised platforms and learning spaces to ensure easy access of resources and expertise. (E/N/I)*
10. *Joint institutional, national, and European projects and action research projects to evaluate existing, and to develop new, programmes, materials and pedagogical approaches which promote multilingualism, use of NLEs and ILL. (I/N/E)*
11. *Encouragement to use common European standards of reference and assessment to guarantee transparency and reciprocal recognition. (N/I)*
12. *Creation of a European language teaching and learning network, which brings together all existing activities and organisations of European higher education institutions and serves as a main port of call for coordination and dissemination of information and experience. (E/N/I)*
13. *Creation of post-graduate and professional programmes whose validation can be recognised by European institutions and be included in universities' career structures. (E/N/I)*
14. *Joint evaluation of effectiveness based on common criteria. (I/N)*
15. *Creation of a systematic approach to facilitating internationalisation at home and inclusion of mobile staff and students into the promotion of multilingualism and intercultural experience. (I/N)*

6. SUMMARY OF NEEDS AND TENTATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEASURES

“In order to improve the quality of language teaching at HE level and to meet the challenge of new developments, NLEs and ILL have to be integrated into the teaching and learning process. First of all, the **infrastructure** has to be put in place to meet these new needs and **policies** established to provide a framework for practice. Then, **teachers** will have to be trained to use it and to develop didactically appropriate materials and methodologically sound approaches to teaching and guiding learning in these new environments and to supporting students in their ILL efforts. Thirdly, **students** need to be trained in using NLEs for language learning purposes and in adopting and developing learning strategies needed in independent and self-directed language learning. Fourthly, **dissemination of information** on successful initiatives is necessary. This would promote both **co-operation** between different institutions with the aim to improve the quality of research, development and practice and to avoid the costly duplication of efforts. Interdisciplinary professional co-operation is also necessary, for instance, between language and content teachers and software and hardware designers in order to arrive at suitable applications and solutions for piloting. Finally, it is essential to **ensure that graduates are properly equipped for the future**. This focuses on the development of language graduates whose ability to communicate, teach, and interact in a foreign language is matched with the ability to do so in a variety of environments and through the intelligent use of a wide range of tools (e.g. authoring tools, computer-aided translation systems, computer and videoconferencing systems, electronic forums, online multilingual management systems, and other communications systems). Other graduates must also be equipped so that they have the necessary communication skills for internationalized workplaces and that they will be able to continue and direct their language studies on a lifelong basis in line with what their professional and social life requires.”

(Meus & Räsänen 2002: Synthesis Report on NLEs)